

Approach-Avoid: Understanding the Tea Party and the Presidential Election of 2012

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Let me start with a brief overview of the Tea Party.

The Tea Party is a historically exceptional confluence of two long-standing traditions on the American Right.

One tradition is extreme fiscal conservatism. These days this perspective is represented by such organizations as Americans for Prosperity, the Cato Institute, FreedomWorks and Americans for Tax Reform. This tradition has been with us since the furious reaction against the New Deal within a certain very conservative sector of the American corporate elite. The arguments these people -- the Liberty League; the DuPont brothers -- made against both Franklin Roosevelt personally and liberal New Deal policies have come down to us almost whole cloth: liberalism is a foreign ideology; it creates dependency and undermines American individualism; it is a sure ticket to loss of liberty. As with Obama vituperation today, Roosevelt was called a tyrant, a socialist, a communist, a fascist, a Nazi. This is a tradition that rigidly opposes the welfare state, labor unions, economic regulation, and Keynesian economic policy.

The second tradition that comes together in the Tea Party is populist social conservatism. This tradition made early appearances in the beginning of the 20th century -- in the campaigns to establish prohibition and to prohibit teaching evolution. Both of these crusades ended poorly for the social conservatives, and they entered a more or less quiescent period of about 40 years. But then came the sixties.

Then the earth shifted beneath the feet of American social conservatives around several of their most fundamental and taken-for-granted beliefs: Sex roles (the women's movement); gender (the gay movement); patriotism (the anti-war movement); religion (legalizing abortion and banning school prayer); moral codes (sex, drugs, rock and roll, the counterculture, the liberal media.) Social conservatives mobilized.

These two traditions, the extreme fiscal conservatives and the right populists, came together in what came to be known in the 1970s as movement conservatism, or the New Right. This was a movement that in a few short years would elect one of its own, Ronald Reagan, as president. They enjoyed a political triumph of the first magnitude: the 30-year liberal ascendancy in American politics gave way to a 30-year conservative ascendancy. Yet these two movements never quite felt that they had achieved what they really wanted. Instead they believed ideologically faulty Republican office holders -- what they have come to call RINOs, Republicans in name only -- thwarted their goals.

In 2008, conventional wisdom in America suggested that the conservative movement, especially after the disastrous presidency of George W. Bush, had run out its historical string. And yet, in 2009, the political story of the year was the eruption of a startling and clamorous new conservative movement that had moved decisively farther to the right than earlier conservatism. Enter the Tea Party.

What makes the Tea Party unique -- and I emphasize *unique* -- in the march of modern American conservatism, is that the passions of the populist right, the uncompromising, expressive side of American conservatism, were brought to bear in the name of the doctrines of the fiscal extremists. Suddenly, the zeal and the vitriol usually reserved for opposing abortion or the "gay agenda" were being directed against Keynesian stimulus legislation, cap and trade climate legislation, economic regulation and, above all, expansion of health insurance coverage to tens of millions of uninsured Americans.

To use one of today's reigning clichés: the election of Obama and the financial and housing collapse -- both in fall 2008 -- created a perfect storm. For Tea Partiers, older white Americans, now toward the end of their working lives they were faced suddenly with the fear of an economic *depression*. And this fear turned into panic with the election of a president who promised to expand government programs. The Tea Partiers felt that expanding to new populations the benefits they already possessed, that they had earned, benefits like Medicare, was less an expansion of such programs than a zero-sum-like taking from them. Liberals coming to power in a moment of unprecedented economic crisis were going to dispossess them.

This panic sent thousands of Tea Partiers into the streets and organizing in spontaneous local groups. Dependency was about to run amok as social policy in their eyes. They saw themselves as the makers, now confronted by the takers; the productive "real Americans" versus the parasites; the deserving set upon by the undeserving. As Mitt Romney put it in the now-famously exposed fundraiser talk in Boca Raton:

There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent

upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That that's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what.

As a political actor, the Tea Party quite quickly found its niche -- and it was a big one. They became the gatekeepers of conservative orthodoxy in the Republican Party. With unprecedented success they used a tool that had been pioneered by Christian conservatives in the 80s and 90s: they ran highly ideological Tea Party candidates against Republican regulars (RINOs to the Tea Party). In the 2010 congressional elections sixty-three seats changed hands in the House, the Republicans became the majority party and something like sixty sitting congress people openly called themselves Tea Partiers. In addition numerous governorships and state legislatures were taken over.

As the 2012 presidential election season loomed, the Tea Party felt that they had their due coming to them from the Republican Party. As a leader of the Tea Party Nation put it, "The Tea Party brought the Republican Party [back from extinction in 2009](#)." And having proved themselves in the 2010 election cycle, the Tea Party had an unshakeable political conviction: Republicans only win when they nominate "real conservatives" -- which in practice means Tea Party approved candidates. This conviction is based on the intensity with which they sincerely believe that they, as the "real Americans," are the genuine voice of an American majority that has yet to be fully mobilized. Some analysts have argued that Tea Party candidates' successes in 2010 depended on the relatively smaller (by one-third) voter turnout than had led to the Democratic triumphs of 2008. But the Tea Party is convinced that they have just begun to tap their vote potential. As one Red Sate blogger put it, "Mr. Obama... you have [awakened a sleeping giant](#)."

The Tea Party's relationship to the central figure in the Republican nominating contest, Mitt Romney, has been a drama of approach-avoidance. For the Tea Party approach is a simple proposition: Anybody but Obama. With the re-election of Obama, the Tea Party fears that their sense of dispossession will become beyond repair, that they will live in something like their homeland under permanent occupation.

The avoidance end of the Tea Party story with Romney is also simple. He is not one of them and they don't like him. His fluid political history stands out in agonizing relief to Tea Partiers: the one-time liberal Governor of Massachusetts, his changed positions on fundamental issues like abortion or health insurance and the very awkwardness of his assumption of the conservative mantle -- for example saying he was a "[severely conservative](#) governor" in Massachusetts.

Romney seems to the Tea Party like someone who is being pushed down their throats by a RINO Republican establishment. His seems to them a reprise of the candidacies of John McCain and Robert Dole, when the failure to nominate "real conservatives" condemned the Republicans to lose. The extraordinary Republican primary season was an enactment, almost a psychodrama, of the Tea Party's Romney-avoidance, of their anybody-but-Romney fervor, willing forth a series of impossibly weak candidates, Bachmann, Herman Cain, Gingrich, Rick Perry, who shot to the top of the polls only to recede with almost the same speed.

Throughout the campaign, reading Tea Party blogs has been like following a sometimes poignant dialogue, a soul searching among flawed options. Hold your nose and vote Romney. Stay home. Strike out as a third party. Talk about an enthusiasm gap.

And yet in the period between Romney's clinching the nomination in the spring and the late August Republican convention, there was a clear movement of approach in Tea Party circles to rally around Romney. Much of this budding enthusiasm was owing to the judgment that Romney's argument for the presidency--the turn-around businessman as the new chief executive--was a winning one. Here's how Tea Party Virginia governor [Bob McDonnell](#) put it in early August:

I'm sensing that the momentum is so clearly on the side of Mitt Romney....Because this is a serious election. It's a serious time for our country. People are not gonna vote on who they like, or who sounds the best. But they're gonna vote on who they really believe can get results, to get the greatest country on earth out of debt and back to work -- that's the only thing that matters.

Republican and Tea Party confidence was enhanced by what came to be called the Wisconsin Model. Americans for Prosperity, the Koch brothers' national political mobilizing organization, flooded Wisconsin with election workers -- sent in the cavalry, as they like to put it -- to defeat the recall of Tea Party Governor Scott Walker. Both AFP and a sister group, the Christian-based [Faith and Freedom Coalition](#), which employs similar tactics to get out the Christian conservative vote, convinced many in the Tea Party that their dream of mobilizing still untapped numbers of "real Americans" in 2012 was a likely ticket to defeating Obama in November.

But more than anything else, Mitt Romney's selection of Paul Ryan as his vice-presidential running mate overcame many Tea Partiers' final barriers to supporting the candidate. Romney had chosen one of them! And not just anyone, but the emerging leader of the House's Tea Party caucus. One of the major organs of right-wing media, Newsmax, ran an [online poll](#) asking, "Are you more likely to vote for Mitt Romney because Paul Ryan is his VP?" When I looked at the poll

results on September 10, there had been over a million and a half responses. Fully 61%, about 950,000 responses, said yes, they were more likely to vote Romney.

Yet this prospering approach toward Romney seemed to reverse after the Republican Convention, which turned out to be something of a negative watershed for the Tea Party's continuing Life-with-Romney drama.

At the convention, Tea Party favorites from the primary campaign were denied the right to address the convention. More than that, the words "Tea Party" seemed to be banished from the speakers' rostrum: this meant no recognition for the people who felt they had brought the party back from extinction. When Romney himself finally spoke, it was as though the Tea Party had become a distant historical footnote. In his speech he violated the very premise that had breathed life into the Tea Party when he said he had wished "President Obama had succeeded because I want America to succeed." This was Tea Party tone deafness at a surpassing level.

But the most substantive blow against Tea Party comity was the Republican leaders' power play that stripped delegates from Ron Paul. The Tea Party, correctly I think, understood this as a maneuver directed at them, a statement by the powers in the party that there was a limit to their tolerance for uppity grass roots. Here's how [Judson Phillips](#), head of Tea Party Nation, put it (in admittedly, his typically over-the-top style):

With these new rule changes, the RNC will act more like the Central Committee of the Communist Party, where no dissent is allowed. The Republican Party establishment feels threatened by an insurgent Tea Party and conservative base that is quite willing and even eager to throw them out.

Since Tampa, things have not gone well for the Republicans. Theirs was a negligible convention bounce in the polls, while that of the Democrats a week later was appreciable. There was much talk that Romney strategists had concluded that the candidate's economic fix-it-man message no longer seemed as if it could carry the day. The gathering fear that Romney might lose to Obama undermines the central pillar -- he looks like a winner -- of his Tea Party support. In Tea Party circles, true to their fundamental conviction that only "real conservatives" could win, there swiftly emerged the hypothesis that Romney's apparent decline was a result of his campaign's having [muzzled Paul Ryan](#).

For the Tea Party right, there is a last-chance quality to this year's election. They recognize that the demographic problem they face owing to America's changing population and the relative liberalness of youth is likely to worsen going forward. They also recognize that the likes of Jeb Bush (the worst of the RINOs) have some ideas on addressing this problem, while they have no such strategic vision. If Obama wins, the institutionalization of liberal social policy, above all Obamacare,

will deepen, perhaps fatally, the hole they feel they need to dig the country out of. If they lose their grudging bet on Romney, theirs will be a tempest of retribution within the Republican Party, a civil war. They have issued their warning. At the Values Voters Convention last week, [Bryan Fischer](#) of the American Family Association offered this shot across the bow:

If Barack Obama wins this election the Republican Party as we know it is finished, it is dead, it is toast -- you can stick a fork in it. And conservatives, grassroots conservatives, are either going to start a third party or they are going to launch a hostile takeover of the Republican Party.